

I had to take action, says' Mahathir

S = 6 OCT 2003

■ DIFFICULT ISSUES DURING HIS LEADERSHIP

Q: Throughout your 22 years as Prime Minister, there must have been times when your words or actions were misunderstood by others. Is there any specific period which you consider to be the toughest because the public and even those in the Government misunderstood your actions and decisions?

During the time of the (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim) thing, a lot of people were saying that I was deliberately getting rid of him. I had no such intention at all but I had to have some responsibility for the future. If somebody is going to succeed me, he must be of some good character.

Because of that I had to take an action which I hated very much because he was, after all, a friend. But for the sake of the country, I had to take the action and forget about friendship and

about my becoming unpopular. So that was something that was a very big regret.

But I did what people didn't understand and they thought I was out to take revenge. I don't take revenge; You can see in the Cabinet - Datuk (Seri) Abdullah (Ahmad Badawi) was against me, (Datuk Seri Dr) Rais Yatim was against me, (Datuk Seri) Syed Hamid (Albar) was against me, (Datuk Paduka Abdul) Kadir Sheikh-Fadzir was against me - but I took them all in.

As long as they are qualified to contribute towards the party and Government, I have no right, because of personal reasons, to get rid of them.

Q: So loyalty and ability to work are what you would consider when you appoint somebody to do the job?

Loyalty to the Government, the party, the principles of the party struggle, that is important. Not loyalty to me.

Even if they were not loyal to me, had contested against me, or even plotted against me, I don't mind. That is part of politics.

Q: Talking about personalities, you had three other deputy prime ministers who did not make it.

Well, it's not my fault. You know, I helped (Tan Sri) Musa (Hitam) become the deputy president (of Umno) and subsequently he became the deputy prime minister.

But somehow or other he decided that he didn't like what I was doing and he decided to resign from the Government and his position in the party. I didn't ask him to resign. It was his decision and not mine.

In the case of (Tun) Ghafar Baba, of course he lost against Anwar. And I learnt later how Anwar managed to beat him.

But he was so disappointed that he did not want to continue anymore to be the deputy.

Then I had Anwar and I thought that by 1998 I could step down and he could take over. But as you know in 1998, this thing happened and I couldn't step down. Also of course I found that he was unable to manage the (financial) crisis. So at that time I could not step down.

Now, I find Pak Lah is in place and he will be different from me. His style will be different but that's okay.

Q: Which issue would you consider was more difficult to handle: the Anwar issue or the financial crisis?

That one (financial crisis) was something that I had to handle anyway, but Anwar's case was something that was very unexpected. I never dreamt (that it would happen). I mean I have had problems with the world press, international agencies but that, I think, was part of my job. Anwar's case was very unfortunate. I had to harden my feelings in order to handle it. I feel this put

a strain on me.

Q: Will the Anwar factor have a bearing in the next general election?

I don't know; it is up to the people. If the people still don't believe me, I cannot help it. I did what I did in all sincerity.

Q: There is this general perception that Anwar has been punished beyond his crime, so to speak.

That is not for me to decide. He did something, he broke the law. Many others from the party who broke the law have been charged in court and sentenced. Mokhtar Hashim (former Culture, Youth and Sports Minister) was sentenced to death. We never intervened. Datuk Harun Idris (former Selangor Menteri Besar) also had to face court action and he was jailed.

These two people did not make an issue out of this and did not go around saying "I have been unfairly dealt with." These people did not go around building support long before (they faced court action.)

In the case of Anwar, as far as

I was concerned, he should be dismissed from the Government. But the police had to take action like they had acted against other ministers. I cannot tell the police that "He is deputy prime minister or ex-deputy prime minister so you cannot touch him." The police took action but the people say that I directed the police and all that.

It is not easy to direct the police. If you try that, immediately it will be known to everybody. Somebody is bound to go around saying that "I have been asked by the Prime Minister to do this and that." You see, the judge in Kota Kinabalu made an accusation against the Chief Justice. You cannot direct a judge, you cannot direct the police, you cannot direct the witnesses, because they will leak it out.

If you ask them to do something that they don't like, they will leak it out. I didn't do anything.

People were actually victimised so they felt that the person who did all these things to them should be punished. That is all.